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Analysis: An introduction to ethical concepts

Vocation

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'Vocation' is a word used in two ways: the one 'down to earth', the other 'high flying'. In the down to earth sense vocational education is contrasted with liberal education, and 'vocational guidance' is a matter of trying to fit people's aptitudes to the kinds of jobs that are available on the market. In the other sense vocation is more than job, career, even role, which can be called 'avocations'. It can, and normally does, include these, but it is a matter of carrying them out from a motivation which comes from a deep spring of action individual to the person himself. It is a notion which has grown up in a religious context, where the Latin *vocatio* has sometimes been literally understood as being 'called' to do a certain kind of work. In its secular use a 'calling' may no longer have religious overtones, and is often used as synonymous with 'profession'. But 'vocation' still carries a suggestion of dedication, even if this is not thought of in religious terms.

This is not a notion to which moral philosophers have paid much attention. An exception is the chapter 'Vocation' in Rashdall's *The Theory of Good and Evil*.[1] Rashdall is concerned with the fact that there are certain kinds of conduct proper to some people who are doing particular kinds of work, mainly of an idealistic kind, which should not be generally expected from everybody. The reflections which follow are mainly my own: I have tried to express them more fully in my *Function, Purpose and Powers*, Chapter IX.[2] As a layman, I hope that readers in the medical and nursing professions may find their own applications in their experience for what I shall try to say.

The religious context

I have said that the notion of 'vocation' grew in a religious context, and in Catholic circles it still has a technical sense, where a 'vocation' is a call to the religious life, also understood here in a technical sense as the life of a monk or a nun. This usage comes from early Christian tradition, where it was held that the call to perfection (except for saints who might appear in any walk of life) required that a person should follow a monastic life under the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The Scriptural source quoted was Christ's saying to the Rich Young Ruler 'If thou wouldst be perfect, go sell all that thou hast and give to the poor'.[3] This led to a distinction between those who made this renunciation within the monastic life and those who tried to serve God faithfully within any secular calling, but did not set their sights so high. A full discussion of the history of this distinction and of how it could lead to a narrow rigorism as well as to aspiration after perfection is given by Kenneth E Kirk in *The Vision of God*.[4] At the Reformation the notion of a double standard in Christian ethics was repudiated by Luther, who rejected the monastic life, and stressed the notion of the 'calling' (German *Beruf*) in which a person served God and his neighbour through his work in the world. This gave a high dignity to ordinary work; but Luther was teaching this in the context of a social order with little social mobility, where it could be assumed that the kind of work a person would do would generally be fixed by his family occupation and status. The notion that a person should go into himself and try to see whether he might have some special vocation (which had been the strength in the Catholic tradition), was lost sight of, though it is now being recovered in a less restricted sense.

Professional codes

Contemporary philosophical ethics is mainly concerned with the interpretation of terms such as 'duty', 'right', 'good', 'obligation', which are used in talking about general principles of morality. There is also the more special question of the principles of professional codes, but these are usually discussed by the practitioners of the profession, rather than by philosophers. A professional code sets out principles of conduct which are considered necessary for a practitioner to perform his function with integrity, and to maintain public confidence in this integrity. They can be formulated, and disciplinary bodies impose sanctions for their infringement. Conduct stemming from a sense of vocation, however, shows an individual attitude to the work which cannot be formulated in a code; it may indeed be conveyed through example and biography rather than by formal prescription. It is a matter of inner incentive which prevents a person from treating his work as a routine with limited

objectives, still less primarily as a way of earning a living (though it may properly be this too). A vocational incentive takes hold of a person and enables him to draw on resources beyond the ordinary conscious level, so that he will have tenacity in the face of frustrations. It expresses individual flair, but is not just romantic enthusiasm for the work, since it is tested by a person's readiness to acquire the necessary training and skills, and to put considerations about opportunities for constructive work before automatically considering the furtherance of his career.

A concept of a profession

If we accept the description of the values which go into the concept of a profession given by Robert K Merton,[5] there is not a sharp distinction between a professional and a vocational attitude. The values he names are, 'first, the value placed upon systematic knowledge and the intellect: knowing. Second, the value placed upon technical skill and trained capacity: doing. Third, the value placed upon putting this conjoint knowledge and skill to work in the service of others: helping'. The vocational way of working will stress the third of these values, but it is also inspired by a love of the work itself. Much of the work of the world depends on people carrying out fairly routine practices which can be prescribed in law and custom. But, particularly where the work is exacting and responsible, this will not be enough, and there will be a need for people who work from the resources of motivation, flair and endurance which go into vocation. Without these a profession is likely to become stereotyped and bureaucratic. Its vitality can depend on its having a supply of vocational characters, though this does not mean that their sense of vocation should be exploited by those responsible for their conditions of employment.

It may also happen that the innovatory practices instituted by a vocational character become the stereotypes of a later generation. Florence Nightingale's struggle to carry out her vocation resulted in creating a profession out of what had all too often been a squalid avocation. (The story has been told by C Woodham-Smith in her biography.[6]) But the Nightingale image of the nurse may no longer fit how another generation sees its vocation, and then needs to be remoulded in terms of this. It is those who approach a profession with the attitude of mind of a vocation who can remake its vision.

References

[1]Rashdall, Hasings (1924). *The Theory of Good and Evil*, Vol. II, 107–148. London. Humphrey Milford.

[2]Emmet, Dorothy (1958). *Function, Purpose and Powers*, Chapter IX. London, MacMillan and New York, St Martin's Press.

[3]*Matthew* 19 v. 21.

[4]Kirk, Kenneth E (1931). *The Vision of God*, Abridged edition, 1934. Longmans, Green & Co.

[5]Merton, Robert K (1960). Some thoughts on the Professions in American Society. *Brown University Papers Number XXXVII*. Providence, Brown University.

[6]Woodham-Smith, Cecil (1950). *Florence Nightingale, 1820–1910*. London, Constable.